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THE FANTASTIC FOUR

LIGHTS! SPANDEX! ACTION!

CAN MARVEL CAPITALIZE ON THIS COMIC QUARTET?

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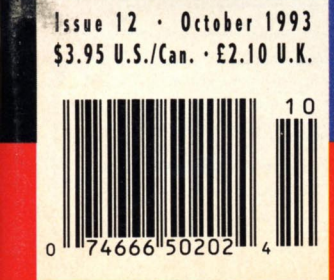
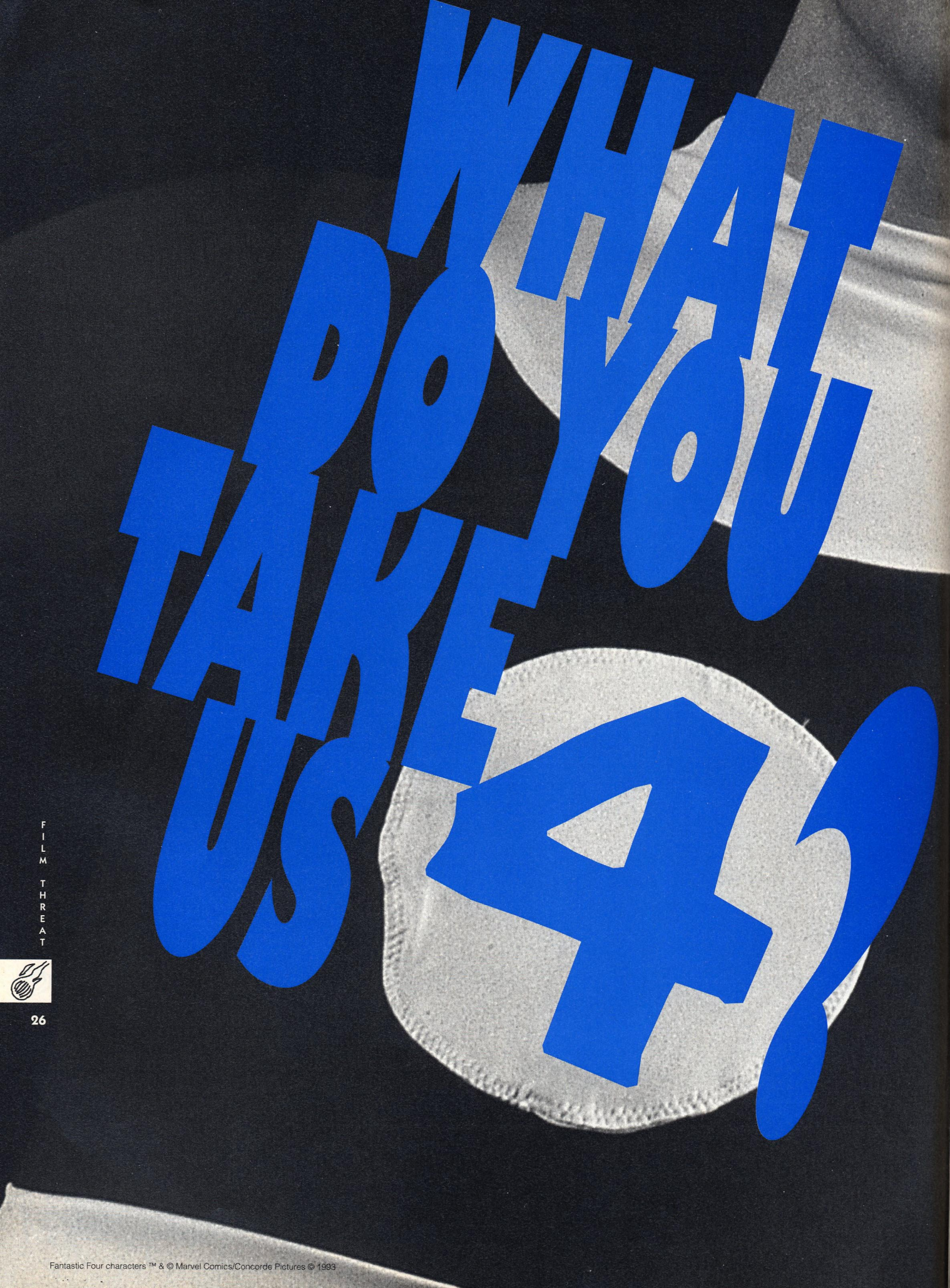


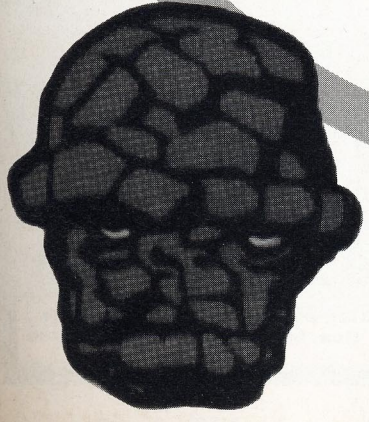
HOLLYWOOD PHONE PRANKS

Hello, Buck Henry... Lily Tomlin... Warren Beatty...
Jeffrey Katzenberg... *Reach Out and Stab Someone*



Fantastic Four characters ™ & © Marvel Comics/Concorde Pictures © 1993

Will there ever be a successful film from the Marvel Comics universe? After unreleaseable crap like CAPTAIN AMERICA and THE PUNISHER, can these characters we loved as kids faithfully make the leap to the silver screen? Discover a ragtag group of dedicated filmmakers determined to make THE FANTASTIC FOUR an epic—even if the budget won't let them!



by Christian Gore

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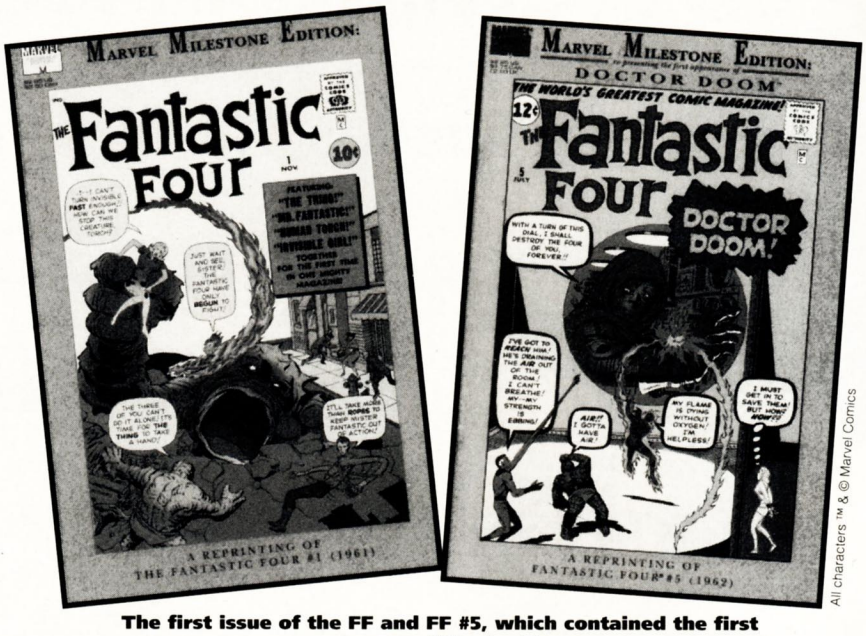
THE ORIGINAL FAB 4

The Fantastic Four changed the face of the comics industry over 30 years ago—and creators Stan Lee and Jack Kirby laid the foundation for a universe of heroes.

by Greg Theakston


MARVEL MILESTONE EDITION:
THE Fantastic Four
A REPRINTING OF THE FANTASTIC FOUR #1 (1961)
MARVEL MILESTONE EDITION:
DOCTOR DOOM
THE WORLD'S GREATEST COMIC MAGAZINE!
THE Fantastic Four
DOCTOR DOOM!
A REPRINTING OF FANTASTIC FOUR #5 (1962)

All characters ™ & © Marvel Comics

The first issue of the FF and FF #5, which contained the first appearance of Doctor Doom.

To witness the birth of the Fantastic Four, we've got to flashback over 30 years. The time: early spring of 1961. The place: Woodmere Golf Course on Long Island. Top dog D.C. Comics publisher Jack Liebowitz is on a hacker's outing with cashed-out comics publisher Martin Goodman. Liebowitz and D.C. Comics distribute Goodman's Monster Comics, an entire line that lacks direction. As Goodman is about to putt, Liebowitz drops a bombshell to psych out his opponent. "The first three issues of our new team book are sellouts. It's called *The Justice League of America*." Goodman takes two strokes to sink his shot at the sixth hole. He's scratching something on his scorecard. It's not just his score, it's also the concept for a new title. What he cannot know is that it was the spark for a whole new universe.

Goodman assigned Marvel Comics editor Stan Lee the task of producing a new superhero team comic book. Lee met with his number one creator, artist Jack Kirby, and they came up with a kind of comic book previously unseen on the wire spinners.

The first issue of *The Fantastic Four* appeared late in August of 1961. For comic book fans it was like the transition from baby foods to solids. They sunk their teeth in deep, loved the new flavors, and consumed it until it consumed them.

Lee and Kirby produced over 100 issues of *The Fantastic Four*, and redefined the medium while doing it. The quartet's epic origin from strange cosmic rays is legend in comic fandom. Jack Kirby explains, "The Fantastic Four got their powers from radiation. We know now that radiation could never change people that way, but in the late 1950s it was very mysterious and misunderstood."

Dump the entire Marvel Universe (Millie the Model included) and that lone title still would have changed the face of comics. Complex emotions were finally presented and wild new concepts

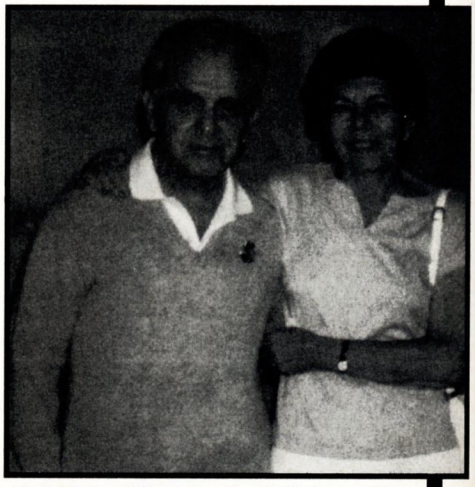


Photo: Greg Theakston

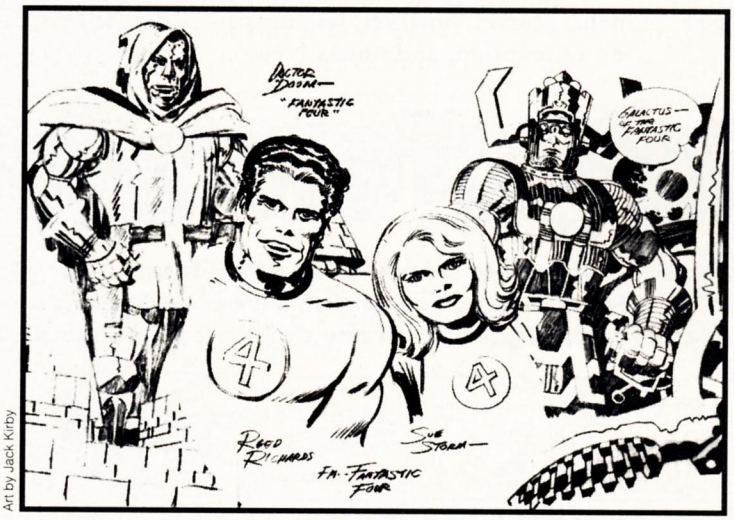
The King of Comics, Jack Kirby, with Roz, his wife of 50 years.

All characters ™ & © Marvel Comics

"People say that the Thing is the character that most resembles me."
—Jack Kirby

were dished up on a monthly schedule. Lee and Kirby delivered everything from worlds within worlds, to time paradoxes, to the negative zone, and kids begged for more.

Creatively, Kirby was ready for a change. His track record stretched back 20 years and showed many hit concepts. He'd done it all, and reinventing superhero comics was the only thing that remained. Under Lee's editorial guidance, Kirby composed a new world that not only fit his specs, it *was* his specs. "People say that the Thing is the character that most resembles me. The gruff manner, the Lower East Side accent, cigar smoking. They say he's my alter identity, and I guess they're right."



Art by Jack Kirby

A collage of characters from Marvel Comics's superhero hit.

Kirby loved science and scientific speculation and realized these theories in the FF stories. Invention and idea were presented within a framework of human emotion (albeit comic book emotion), and the reader not only understood the concept, but had an emotional context for it. Kirby's ideas about the foursome reveal an attention for detail. "They're a well-balanced group. Reed is the intellect, and the Torch is the energy of youth and action. The Invisible Girl is the intuition and represents our compassionate side. The Thing is the strength of stamina we all have within us."

The Fantastic Four was also a proving ground for dozens of new characters. The good guys were frequently introduced as heavies, including the Submariner, the Inhumans, the Black Panther and the Silver Surfer. Then there are the villains. Without great bad guys, the heroes don't shine as brightly, and *The Fantastic Four* was well stocked in that department too. "The Fantastic Four were such a strong group, it forced me to come up with more powerful villains than I had previously considered," says Kirby.

Foes included the likes of the Mole Man, Galactus and Blastaar. Then there is the unforgettable Doctor Doom (see sidebar, page 32). Kirby reveals that Doom is a perfectionist, and when an experiment backfires, it drives him to hide his face behind a mask. Kirby adds, "We tried to show more than one side to our villains in *The Fantastic Four*. They became more real and more believable because of it. Nobody is all bad. As bad as Doctor Doom is, there is some goodness in him. He may seem like a nice guy, but while he's serving you tea in the living room, he's having your mother kidnapped from the kitchen."

Thirty years after their creation, *The Fantastic Four* is still a major body in the Marvel Universe. Filming characters like Batman and the Hulk is nothing compared to the complexities in visualizing the FF. But, technology finally caught up with Kirby and we now have the ultimate comic book experience realized for the big screen.

Greg Theakston has written about comics history for 20 years. Mr. Theakston is the editor of The Betty Pages *and* Tease! *magazine. For books about Marvel Comics history and Jack Kirby write to: Pure Imagination, 88 Lexington Ave., Suite 2E, New York, NY 10016.*

MARVEL MADNESS

It was my favorite comic book as a kid. While others drooled over *The X-Men* and *Spiderman*, I flipped for *The Fantastic Four*. Even as an obnoxious, yet innocent, nine-year-old, I joked with friends, "If I was Mister Fantastic, I know what part of my body I would stretch!" I can still remember fantasizing about being in the FF and beating the crap out of real-life bullies and imaginary villains. So when I found out they were making a *Fantastic Four* movie, I had to do a story—my way. Marvel Comics has the worst track record when it comes to adapting their most popular characters in their respective universe to film. I hoped this time it would be different.

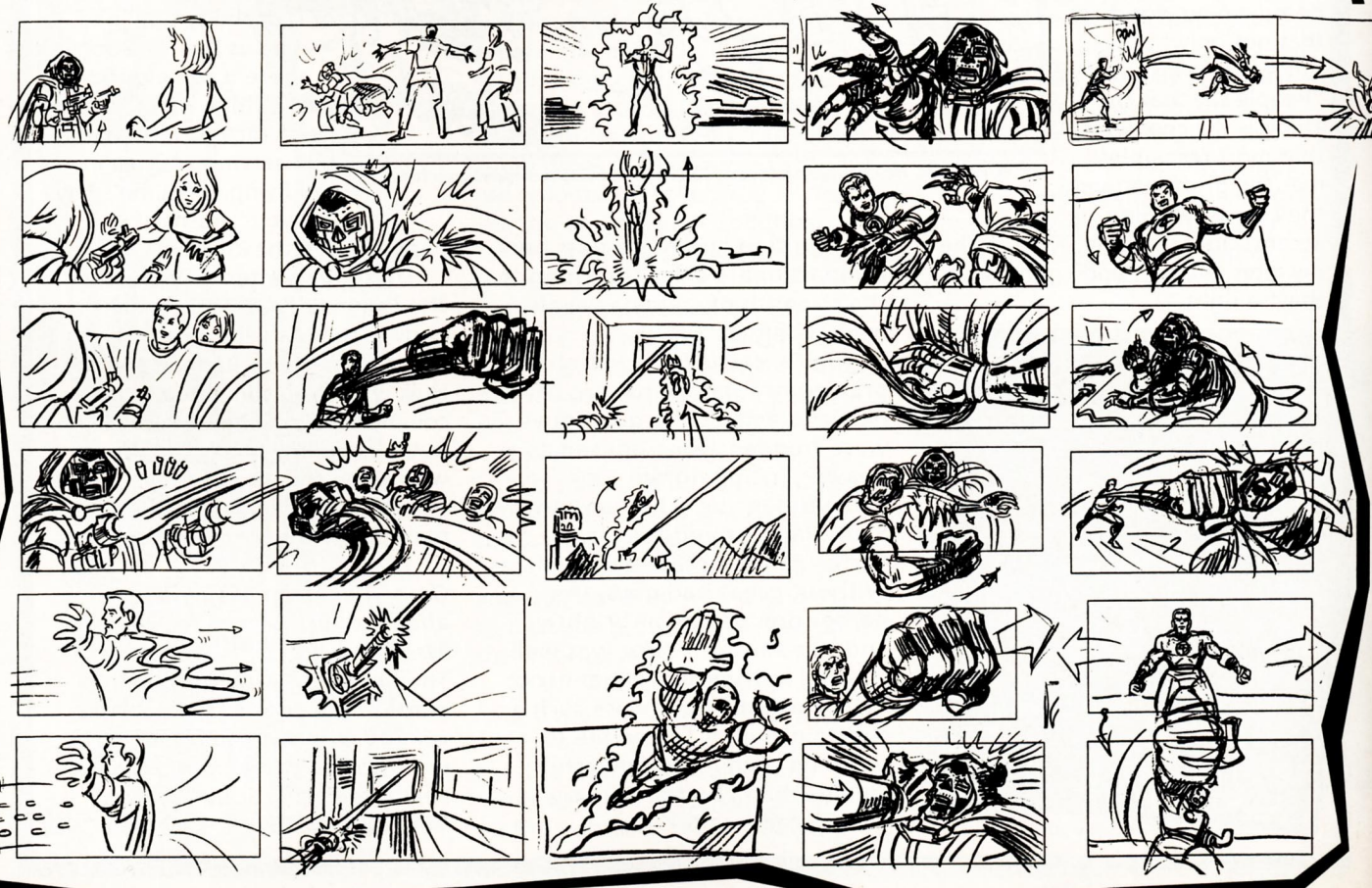
Neue Constantin Films, a German company who has produced such big-budget flicks as ***The NeverEnding Story, Das Boot*** and ***The Name of the Rose***, had the rights to the *FF* property for six years. Their option on the superhero team was going to expire at the end of '92, when the rights would revert back to Marvel. A source at the mega-giant comic company revealed that Marvel wanted the option to run out so they could sell the property for more to an eager studio, since superhero films are currently bringing top dollar. Neue Constantin Films wanted to renew the option, but claimed that the movie's complex special effects still needed a few more years of development. Marvel, however, was unwilling to reoption, and unless Neue Constantin was in principal photography by December 31, 1992, they would lose the project altogether.

The question remained: Who could get a film this complex made that fast? Enter Roger Corman's Concorde Pictures. If anyone in Tinseltown can crap out a movie, Corman can. A coproduction deal between the two companies was struck in August '92. The *FF* movie would have a budget of $2 million.

Only $2 million for an epic story like this?! Shouldn't the budget be something like $40 million?!!! The filmmakers who would bring the legend of the Fantastic Four to the silver screen would prove to be a crew dedicated and determined to do the best they could with what little money was available.

STUNNING STORYBOARDS

"I sat in a room with a storyboard artist for a week and just plotted out all the special effects shots," explains director Oley Sassone. These fantastic effects sequences were drawn by Pete Von Sholly.



All characters ™ & © Marvel Comics

ON THE SUPER SET

Principal photography commenced on December 28, 1992, just in time to beat the deadline.

Stan Lee was on hand to see his comic book characters brought to life. When Lee saw the actors in full dress and makeup, he said that they looked exactly how he envisioned them when he first created the characters. A good sign indeed to *FF* fans, although this is from the man who has essentially evolved into the Paul McCartney of the comics world and never says anything bad.

PHOTO BY ILONA LIEBERMAN

Costume designer Réve Richards shows off his handy work.

When I first walked onto the set, I was anxious to see the characters in costume. I wondered how this creative crew would bring my childhood heroes to life. So I decided to speak with the costume designer, Réve Richards. "When I was hired to do the film, I went to Golden Apple Comics on Melrose Avenue to pick up some *Fantastic Four* issues, and the guy asked me why I wanted them," recalls Richards. "I told him I was working on the film, and these people in the store just swarmed me and said, 'You are going to be faithful to it?' And I told them, 'This is why I am buying these books.'

"They freaked me out a little bit," he continues. "I mean, I've known religious fanatics, but not comic fanatics." Obviously, Richards hasn't been to many comic book conventions or he would know that comic geeks are fickle when it comes to screen versions of their favorite superheros. Michael Keaton's casting as Batman spawned a vitriolic letter-writing campaign to Warner Bros. I wondered if fans would be as passionate about this film as well.

Upon closer examination of the costumes, they seemed to be made of a cheap spandex with sewn-on felt 4s. Presumably, as part of the story, these costumes are handmade by Susan Storm (a.k.a. the Invisible Girl) herself, so they should have a homemade feel—I hope. Or perhaps the budget is *really* low—even less than $2 million!

After obtaining a copy of the script and thumbing through it, I discovered something to support my suspicions. One particular fight scene was tagged with the words: "Explosions, effects and fights break out—as much as the budget will allow." It's obvious that screenwriter Craig Nevius knew whom he was working for when he penned the script.

GUN CRAZY

As I explored the studio looking for evidence that would upset die-hard *FF* afficionados, I was kept away from a closed set that was currently shooting. I figured this would be a great time to meet with other members of this fine filmmaking unit and get some real dirt. One source on the production, who refused to be named, joked that they should rename the film ***The Average Four*** "because there's not enough money to make it fantastic!"

One of the more interesting characters on the crew was the weapons expert, Paul Ahern. A stocky, diminutive and frightening presence, he spoke passionately about his guns. Asked what his favorite weapon was, Ahern responds, "Probably the mini-gun—mostly used by Arnold Schwarzenegger in his movies." And what about the kind of weapons used in this film? "We have high-tech 9mm pistols and M100 .22s. They're all big and they're real loud." This piques my interest so I further prod Ahern on the best choice of firearm to kill a big group of people. Without hesitation he gleefully answers, "The mini-gun. You can put out about 6,000 rounds a minute."

Ahern obviously knew a lot, maybe too much, about guns. So how exactly did he become a weapons specialist? "I worked for three years with the Department of Defense," he says proudly. "No secrets to tell." But, after relatively little coaxing, Ahern offers a few secrets anyway, including the fact that the curtains in the Oval Office are made out of ballistic cloth and that the back of the President's

Weapons expert Paul Ahern came to the set loaded with guns.

PHOTO BY ILONA LIEBERMAN

Fantastic Four characters ™ & © Marvel Comics/Concorde Pictures © 1993

chair is bullet-proof. The President's limousine is also armored, he adds.

Then Ahern lightens up. "I have a secret I can tell you," he says. "There's a military course for Special Forces medics where each medic is given a goat for a patient. Somewhere along the course of this class, the instructor might come by and shoot its leg off and the medic would have to fix it. Or they might bash it in the head with a hammer, and you have to save your goat."

NO-BRAND ONLY

Speaking of saving, there's a funny rumor that Roger Corman once fired a craft services worker because he served Diet Coke instead of a no-brand cola. Craft services, if you don't already know, is the place that all intelligent journalists go to hang out, eat chips and salsa and get free drinks. The man in charge at the *FF* food table was Mike Diroma. During my eating binge, I was amazed to discover that so many generic versions of food actually existed. According to Diroma, everything gets eaten by the end of the day. Lunch normally consists of bologna sandwiches, so I decided to indulge myself.

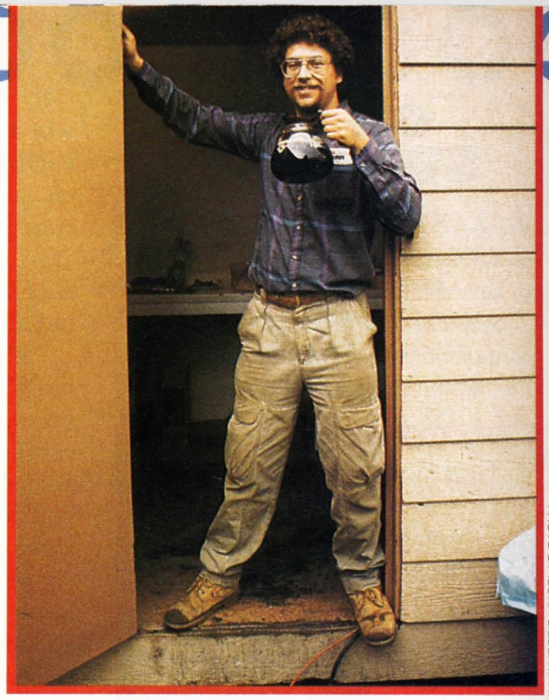


PHOTO BY ILONA LIEBERMAN

Craft services were served by Mike Diroma. "No-brand cola anyone?"

DOOMSAYER

Actor Joseph Culp puts a Shakespearean twist on the FF's arch nemesis, Doctor Doom.

Illustration by Jack Kirby. All characters ™ & © Marvel Comics

This never-before-published drawing of Doctor Doom reveals that the vain villain wore a mask to hide just one tiny scar.

Doom was for me an operatic dip into my own latent sadomasochistic tendencies," says the intense actor. And Joseph Culp means it. When pressed to talk a little about his personal life, he refers to himself as one of Doom's "impersonators."

Culp, who grew up in California, had starring roles in ***Dream Lover*** and Monte Hellman's ***Iguana***. However, his role of Doctor Doom is one that he takes very seriously. "As a kid, the *FF* was probably the only comic I really cared about."

In this journalist's opinion, genre actors are not as appreciated as dramatic actors. In science fiction, fantasy and horror, the actors are expected to bring believability to unbelievable characters and impossible situations.

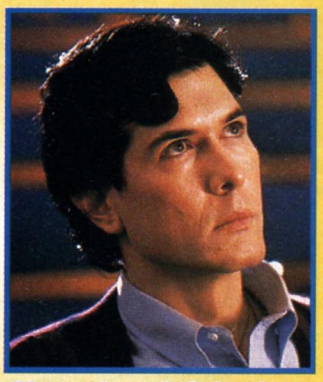
There was no doubt in Culp's mind that he was up to the task. "I have some Shakespearean training. Doom is a very operatic character, a glorious tyrant king. This was a very challenging role because I was incarcerated in an iron suit most of the time, which was very grueling, frustrating and maddening."

Does Culp have any interesting body scars himself? "I got a scar on the crook of my left leg from wearing the suit. It dug into me—I suppose my motivation could have been brought on by actual pain during the performance."

Doctor Doom has never been unmasked in the comics. However, Jack Kirby's interpretation of the face behind the iron mask is that Victor Von Doom hides only one tiny facial scar because he is so vain. Culp offers his own insight. "Doom is a narcissist to the extreme. I believe he is completely scarred and mutilated. Being such a brilliant scientist, he could certainly reconstruct his face. But he chose to keep his scars as a living testament to his vengeance on the world and, specifically, Reed Richards.

"With Doom you really can't go too far. He's a raging ego and a wounded lover."

—Joseph Culp, the actor playing Doctor Doom



Above: Joseph Culp plays Victor, Reed Richards's college buddy who falls victim to a terrible accident.
Right: Culp as the operatic Doom.

"Reed stands for everything Doom wishes he could have—acceptance from the world, good looks, a sexy girlfriend. He's very envious of Reed and felt betrayed when their experiment went awry. He always wanted to be Reed's best friend, and when everything went wrong and he nearly died in the experiment, Reed went on to collect all the laurels that he might have had. So there's a lot of jealousy involved in his relationship. I think that deep down he actually loves Reed Richards. *The person you love the most is the one you hate the most.* Doom's inner sorrow and frustration—a kind of unbridled psychotic rage—propels him to do the things he does." Culp ends our conversation with a very serious diatribe on the depths of the demented Doctor. "Remember that Doom is all that we wish to be and all that we cannot face. From the depths of our fear he is the towering Freudian id. With Doom you really can't go too far. He's a raging ego and a wounded lover."

All characters ™ & © Marvel Comics

FF FX

Computer special-effects technology has finally evolved so that heroes can easily dissolve, morph, stretch and shoot fireballs.

Scott Billups doesn't brag about the $1-million worth of computer hardware he has in his den. "If you really wanted to get into motion pictures, you could pick up a Mac IIci, an accelerator, some RAMs and a multi-gigabyte drive, and you're in business."

Yeah, sure. Billups is in charge of the complex special effects for ***The Fantastic Four*** that will bring to life super-abilities never before seen on the movie screen.

The clean-cut computer wiz once owned an ad agency with 85 employees. Then, in 1983, he walked away from advertising to launch into computers. The versatility of the Macintosh system (which FILM THREAT uses as well) inspired Billups to make the severe career change. His impressive résumé includes work for major companies like Sony, Levi Strauss, Mattel and the Wendy's fast-food corporation. He's worked on films like ***Jurassic Park*** as well as the nuking of Los Angeles sequence in ***T2***.

Billups acts like an excited kid with a new toy when he speaks about his work. "Each individual frame is transferred with a laser-registered gate that configures a film frame into a computer image or document. The art is then meticulously altered, just as you would any computer-illustrated piece. The process is less cumbersome and more convincing than the old blue screen process." Sounds good. Unfortunately, I couldn't understand any of his computer mumbo-jumbo.

(continued on next page)

Effects wiz Scott Billups troubleshoots a computer crash (that darn System 7!).

(Diroma also leaked this craft services secret: Get all your stuff at Smart & Final.)

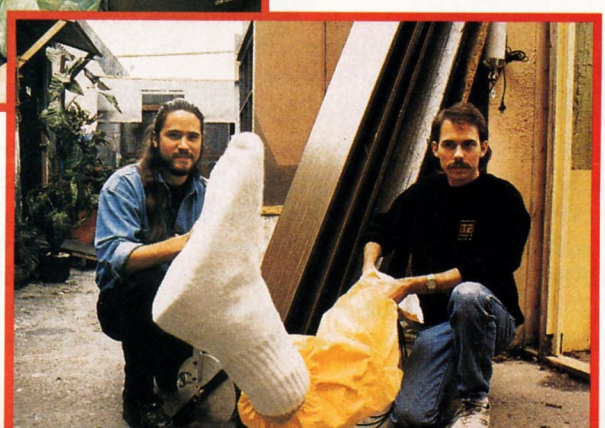
I ventured back inside the studio to see if I could get a glimpse of the set and actors to no avail. I then met up with a location manager who rambled on about how no one should shoot in Southern California because the rules and regulations make it so difficult. I mentioned that it sounds as confusing as parking in L.A. (I consider myself a semi-intelligent person, but I can't even understand the parking signs in this city, they all blur together: NO PARKING BETWEEN 9 P.M. TO 8 A.M. MON-SAT. NO PARKING MONDAY STREET CLEANING. PARKING ONE HOUR. What does it all mean?)

OPTIC NERVES

What's even more baffling is the creation of all the *FF* special effects on such a tight budget. The makeup effects for the film are done by the diligent team of Optic Nerve, who are John Vulich and his partner Everett Burrel. I explored their makeshift shop in a corner of the studio, which had the Thing costume hung on a rack. Doctor Doom's mask and accouterments were also strewn around as these two craftsmen tried to do the best job with what they had.

This effects team, which designed the zombies in the remake of *Night of the Living Dead*, was responsible for bringing the character of the Thing and Doctor Doom to life in under three months. "We asked for more time to sculpt the Thing suit, but it's the best we could do on such short notice," says Vulich. For ref-

PHOTO BY ILONA LIEBERMAN



Above: The Thing costume was sculpted by effects house Optic Nerve.
Right: Dave Snyder and Rob Watson stretch a foot long. This on-set effect allowed Mister Fantastic to trip some of Doom's guards.

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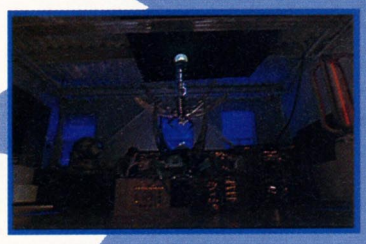
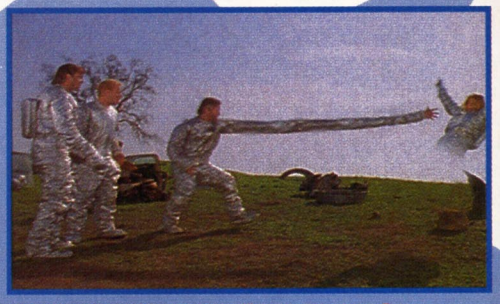
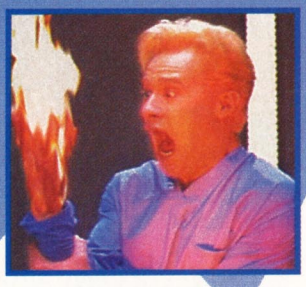




These altered effects show how easily gags can be achieved using computers.



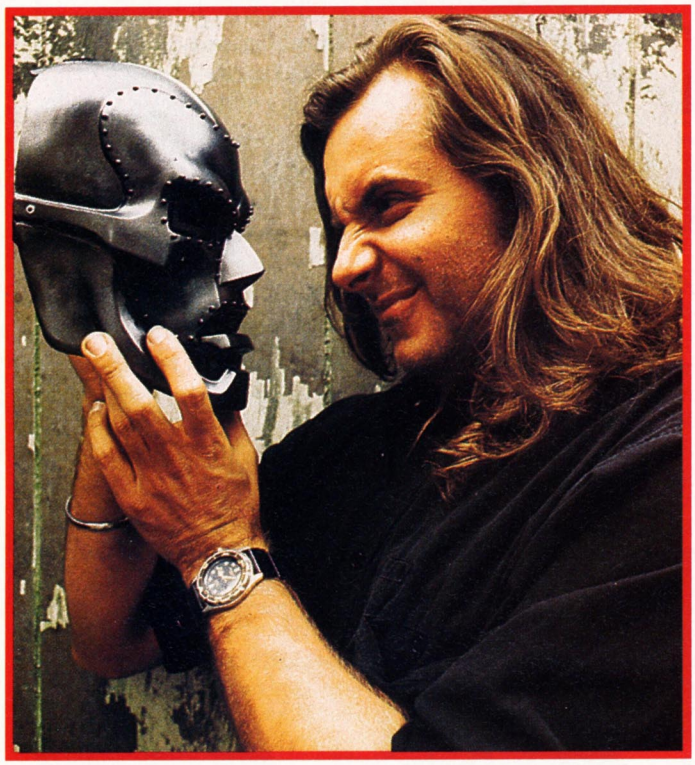
(continued from page 33)

Billups was on hand as the second unit director for ***The Fantastic Four*** and worked closely with director Oley Sassone. "It was so cool working with Oley. There are few directors who are secure enough with their capabilities that they allow their picture to be good. That's how you know good directors—they let people who know what they're doing do their job."

So how do you make a stretching man look real? "In the old comics when Mister Fantastic stretches out, he gets very thin like a thread. In the newer ones he's a massive guy, so we're trying to hit a happy medium. This computer technology has become accessible so that even low-budget films can afford fantastic effects. There are 127 computer gags in this film, and a lot of them were made up right on the set."

Billups's next project will be ***Pteradactol Woman From Brentwood***, starring Kirstie Alley as a woman who turns into a prehistoric bird. And he'll possibly work on another superhero film about a teenager who is bitten by a spider and inherits the insect's power. (Take a guess?)

PHOTO BY ILONA LIEBERMAN.



Above: Dave Snyder prepares Alex Hyde-White for this reaching performance. Left: John Vulich of Optic Nerve stares down the Doom mask he created.

FANTASTIC ACTING

erence, they stuck to the more recent image of the characters from the John Byrne series of *FF* comics. The result is astounding. It's surprising to discover that Ben Grimm's rock-hard appearance is actually meticulously painted foam rubber. The Thing's facial expressions are controlled by three remote controls that can make him smile or get real mad. After viewing dailies (which I was able to sneak into), everyone agreed that the effects team at Optic Nerve had achieved the Thing's menacing presence.

"It's like cooking Sunday morning breakfast at Bob's Big Boy—you put your head down at the grill at about five in the morning and by 11:30 you're finished and you really have no memory of what you've just done. You hope everyone was fed and nobody got shot." Alex Hyde-White, the actor who plays Reed Richards/Mister Fantastic, offers that description of what it was like

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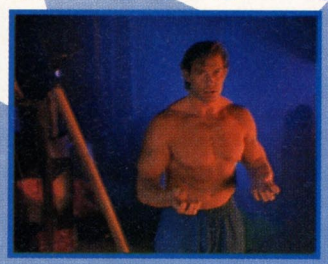
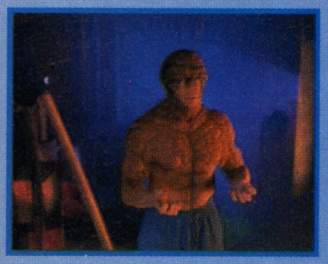
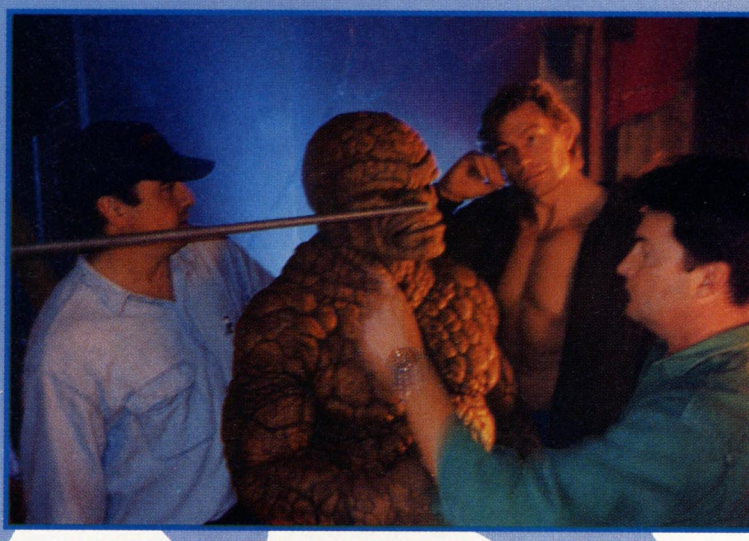


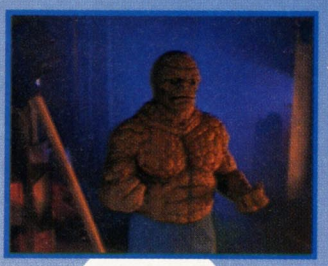
"There are 127 computer gags in this film and a lot of them were made up right on the set."

—Scott Billups, Effects Wiz





Mr. Fantastic gets a leg up on Doom's guards.



Ben morphs into the Thing.

Left to right: Oley Sassone, Carl Ciarfalio (the Thing) and Scott Billups line up a shot that will be morphed later on the computer.

to shoot such an involved project in a mere three weeks.

Hyde-White is so proud of his part as the stretchy superguy that he's even gone to the trouble of purchasing several action figures of Mister Fantastic. (He also hopes they change the toy's head to match his own.) "The great thing about Reed Richards is that he's a mildly psychotic and dysfunctional superhero and a human being as well," says Hyde-White. "To play the deepest thinker in the Marvel universe is quite an honor, and it also says to me that the character spends a lot of time in his own head." The thespian, who was forced to dye his temples gray for the part of Richards, adds, "It's sort of Shakespearean in tone and it has an internal depth."

TWO THINGS

While Hyde-White's character had the opportunity to show off his mental prowess, a tag team of actors joined together to display the Thing's brute strength. Michael Bailey-Smith, who plays Ben Grimm, was cast too late to have a Thing costume molded to his features. That honor went to stuntman Carl Ciarfalio. Together they were a team, with Bailey-Smith on the set at all times to consult with Ciarfalio on each scene involving the Thing. Bailey-Smith says of this acting partnership: "I personally took it upon myself to make sure that if I couldn't be in the suit, then I wanted to have as much input as possible. I wanted there to be a continuity, so that the mannerisms are basically what I would do. For a big scene, I would show Carl what I would do and he would add some of his own stuff."

Bailey-Smith regretted not being cast in time to be the man behind the rocks. "When they first hired me, I told them that I wanted to be in the Thing suit because that's my character," says Bailey-Smith. "I had invested so much into it, but they told me that they had already hired Carl, who is a great guy, and he put so much into it."

Ciarfalio says that his stunt background helped smooth over the role. "I've been doing stunts for so long that when I double an actor, I have to move like him, I have to walk like him," he says. "It's something that I look at in people and hopefully I'm able to pick up." So how does Ciarfalio like playing the Thing? "It's a pretty bitchin' character," he says. And to prove it, the stuntman adds that he regularly brags to coworker pals about snagging the role.

PLAYING WITH FIRE

Jay Underwood, who portrays Johnny Storm/the Human Torch, is no stranger to throwing fireballs. He did just that in an episode of *Superboy* in which he played the Kryptonite Kid. What's ironic is that the actor who plays the hotheaded Storm cites Aquaman, the D.C. underwater avenger, as his favorite comic book character. "I'm the complete opposite of the [Torch] character," says Underwood. "He's got a quick temper and that's not really me. I think I would be a bit more passive. I like Aquaman because he swims around and gets the fish to do

(continued on page 38)

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ALEX HYDE-WHITE

REED RICHARDS • MISTER FANTASTIC

BIO: Alex was born in London and moved to Southern California at the age of four. The son of an actor, Alex grew up in the theater. He attended Georgetown University for one year to study government and realized, "I'd have to be a better actor to be a politician." Alex played young Henry Jones (Sean Connery's character) in ***Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*** and has also appeared in ***Pretty Woman, Phantom of the Opera, Time Tracker*** and ***Ishtar.*** The busy thespian is very proud of his three-year-old son, Garrick Williams Hyde-White.

❶ *Did you read comic books as a kid?*
I was into the Hanna-Barbera cartoons of the FF of the late '60s. I didn't read the comic books.

❷ *What specific acting challenges did your role pose?*
The way the arm extends is a real trick. When I get ready to throw a punch to Doctor Doom, I have this plaster cast on my shoulder that is rigged to a hydraulic. My real arm is at my side, sort of gripped back, and controls this arm that extends and holds it in place. So after about six or 12 takes of this, it's pretty heavy and it's really cinched tight. It was much more of an effort for Reed Richards to throw a punch than I think Stan Lee intended.

❸ *Did you get to keep your costume?*
I'm working on it.

❹ *If you could stretch any part of your body, what would it be?*
[Long pause] The horizon between my left ear and my right. [laugh]

REBECCA STAAB

SUSAN STORM • INVISIBLE GIRL

BIO: Rebecca grew up in Omaha, Nebraska, went to college at the University of Nebraska, was a model in Paris for two years and starred in numerous TV shows like *Cheers, Beverly Hills 90210, Wonder Years* and basically anything that's been on television in the last four years. She resides in Burbank, California, with her boyfriend (of seven years) and her spoiled dog Pete. And she says, "If it weren't for the crime, pollution and earthquakes, L.A. would be just fine."

❶ *Who do you like better, Betty or Veronica?*
Yes, I read *The Archies*. I was more of a Betty type.

❷ *Do you have to be naked to be invisible?*
Right, it's really...I mean, it's an external power but it's manifested mentally. So, if there was something I was holding that I would want to turn invisible, I could do that too. It's a state of being as opposed to a process that has to be acquired. There are other powers I have that I could use if they do sequels, like creating force fields. So, yes, I like the fact that I got to keep my clothes on.

❸ *Would you want to be a superhero in real life?*
Sure, I think it would be great! But it depends on what your power is, but if I really had the power to become invisible, I would do it in a minute.

❹ *Your character marries Mr. Fantastic. Did his stretching ability have anything to do with your decision?*
Falling in love was a mutual adventure...as people, we needed to be married, but also our super powers are beneficial to each of us.
And the fact that he can stretch doesn't hurt either.
That's true! [laugh]

Photos by Ilona Lieberman. Characters™

JAY UNDERWOOD

JOHNNY STORM • THE HUMAN TORCH

BIO: Jay has been acting since he was a child (he just turned 24). He's no stranger to fantasy films, as he constantly finds himself playing gifted individuals in movies as diverse as ***The Boy Who Could Fly, Uncle Buck*** (when he was 16!), ***The Invisible Kid*** and, most recently, in George Lucas's *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles* as Ernest Hemingway. Jay lives in Burbank, California, with his dog Riley, and he loves fly-fishing. "There are plenty of days when I'd rather be fishing than acting."

❶ *Did you read comic books when you were young?*
I remember reading *Mad, Cracked* and *Richie Rich* because those were the comics they had where I got my hair cut. I never really was into comics too much.
❷ *Are you a natural blond?*
No. They asked me at the audition if I'd be willing to dye my hair blond, and I said, "Absolutely!" I had a really, really bad reaction and my scalp started blistering up. It was pretty deadly.
❸ *Do you have any fear of fire?*
No, but you've got to be careful, especially after this thing with Brandon Lee. It just goes to show that no matter how safe it seems, you've always got to be on top of things. I do not recommend playing with fire.
❹ *Have you ever really thought about the phrase "Flame on"?*
It's just Johnny's way of igniting. In fact, there's a scene in the movie where he finds out that's what triggers it—suddenly he lights up!
Kinda like a Bic lighter.
[laughs] Yeah.

MICHAEL BAILEY-SMITH

BENJAMIN GRIMM

BIO: Michael was an Air Force brat, moving everywhere from Michigan to South Dakota to Nevada to Iran. He played high school football, where he was teased about taking classes for this "acting thing." He joined the 82nd Airborne to become a paratrooper because "I was skinny and I wanted to get respect." Michael has a computer science degree, played football with the Dallas Cowboys and appeared in ***Nightmare on Elm Street 5***. Currently, the 6'4" stocky actor kick boxes, mountain climbs, plays basketball, acts and cruises the streets of L.A. on his Harley-Davidson.

❶ *Did you read comic books as a kid?*
Somewhat. When I got into lifting weights, I enjoyed anything that was big and muscular. I loved the Hulk.
❷ *What particular acting challenges did your role pose?*
Ben's constantly fighting with why he has turned into this... thing. There's a wide range of emotions, from being sad to enraged. I've played all bad guys, so it's great to beat somebody up and not feel bad about it in the morning.
❸ *Would you want to be a superhero in real life?*
Oh, yeah. I've already been recognized. There have been quite a few comic magazines that have come out with articles, and I was at Gold's Gym in Venice and someone said, "Hey, you're Ben Grimm from the Fantastic Four!" What's fantastic is having little kids come up and ask for my autograph.
❹ *Is your whole body rock-hard?*
Most definitely.

CARL CIARFALIO

THE THING

BIO: Carl is a professional stuntman and president of the Stuntmen's Association of Motion Pictures. He's doubled for Lou Ferrigno and Tom Cruise and worked on over 200 films doing dangerous stunts. His special abilities include boxing, scuba diving and judo. Carl lives in Toluca Lake, California, and is very happily married to his wife Dawn.

❶ *Did you read comic books as a kid?*
Not really. And I wasn't familiar with the Fantastic Four, so this is an all-new adventure for me.
❷ *Was it fun wearing the Thing suit?*
They built the whole thing custom for me. They had to cast my entire body—it was quite an experience. It was a full-on role, which was a big challenge and a lot of fun.
❸ *Would you want to be a superhero in real life?*
No. I'm married and I want to raise a family, so putting on an outfit at three in the morning and jumping out the window just doesn't appeal to me. I'd rather not be a superhero but be the best that I can be at being a human being. And in my eyes, there's only been one superhero that's ever walked on this Earth.
❹ *Who is that one superhero?*
I'm Christian, and that was Jesus Christ.

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(continued from page 35)

the work. That's more my speed."

Considering the pressure enlisted by parent groups, does Underwood anticipate any ridiculous flack for presenting a character that douses himself in flames, an activity some stupid kid might imitate? "When I did ***The Boy Who Could Fly***, the Disney Channel asked me to tape a disclaimer telling kids that it's just a movie and don't try to fly," he says. "In fact, I heard that a little kid tried to fly and jumped out his window. I think it's more the responsibility of the parents than the filmmakers to explain that this is fantasy."

INVISIBLE PANTIES?

As I studied the cool sets that had been constructed on Corman's soundstage, I noticed that the male grips and production assistants were having a hard time doing their jobs. They seemed to be in a fantasy of their own. Rebecca Staab, the woman cast to play the Invisible Girl, was in full ***FF*** costume—and what a spandex suit it is! This outfit is so skintight that it leaves little to the imagination. Every nonessential crew member was trying to poke their head in to get a glimpse of the Invisible Girl's very visible bod.

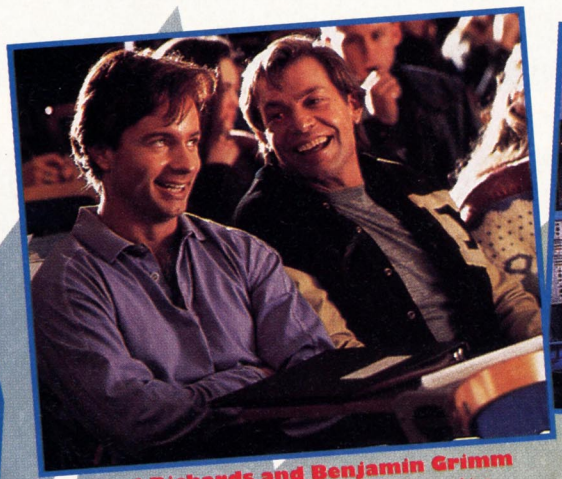
But that wasn't all—Staab has the "look." "When I walked into the audition," Staab recalls, "they had pictures on the wall of Susan Storm and I thought, *This is good—she looks just like me.*"

DYNAMIC DIRECTOR

What kind of director would take on such a monumental project with such impossible odds? First of all, this filmmaker wouldn't have the luxury of just throwing money at a shot and then hoping it looks good. This director would have to be used to working under such adverse conditions as having no budget. Yet, sometimes this can actually make a project better because it forces directors to come up with creative solutions to monetary problems. The director chosen for this impossible task was Oley Sassone.

Sassone grew up in New Orleans and jammed in a band called Sex Dog. He made Super 8 movies as a kid and worked as a production assistant on any film that came into town. He began directing music videos when the industry was in its infancy. The first video he directed was the song "China" for an early-'80s band called the

THE STORY OF THE FANTASTIC FOUR



Reed Richards and Benjamin Grimm attend Empire State University.

Reed and his pal Victor attempt to harness the power of Collosus, a band of energy that travels through space like a comet.

Collosus is too much for the brave quartet and their starship crash lands on Earth.

The crew is believed dead. Alicia Masters, having touched Ben's face only once, solemnly sculpts his manly features.

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Director Oley Sassone (left) coaches Rebecca Staab on her powers of invisibility.

Red Rockers. Riding that success, Sassone moved to Hollywood, directing over 100 music videos for everyone from Eric Clapton to Bruce Hornsby to Bonnie Raitt. He made a lot of money, but Sassone longed to make features.

In 1991, he cowrote and executive produced the Disney film *Wild Hearts Can't Be Broken*, and then made a short film called *The Roommate*. This black comedy starring Bill Paxton had some pretty strange stuff in it. This got him his first feature-length directing gig with Roger Corman. Sassone's early training in music videos, which taught him to shoot fast, proved useful in helming the action film *Bloodfist 3*. But he was still really looking for that big break.

FANTASTIC OPPORTUNITY

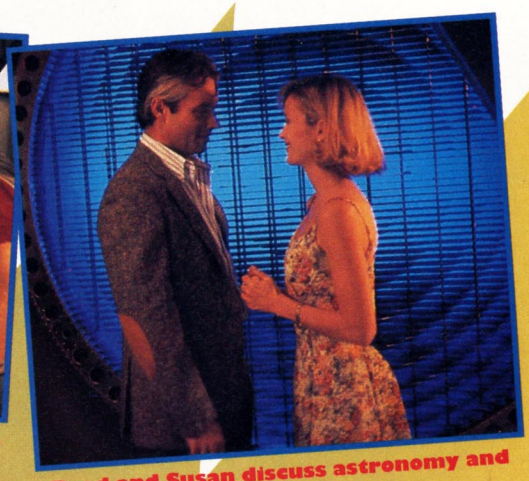
When the *FF* project came to Concorde in the summer of '92, Sassone had built a rep as a good action director who could work quickly. Another point in his favor was the fact that he was an *FF* fan. "When I heard Doctor Doom was in the movie, I got really excited," says Sassone.

But Sassone had seen other comic-to-film adaptations go astray and disappoint comic followers, including the big-budget *Batman* movies. "It's all a big *deal*—you've got this person starring and this person directing—they have to get directors that really grew up reading the comics and understand who these characters are," he says. "Not just say, 'This is a good marketing thing because it's been around for so long.' That's wrong."

Sassone took on the burden of faithfully bringing the comic quartet to the screen. "I went back and read every single issue of *The Fantastic Four Marvel Masterworks* series before I went to bed, just to refamiliarize myself with these characters and to try to put some of those elements from the comic into the movie."

The experiment fails! Victor is struck by the energy wave and tragically killed.

TEN YEARS LATER... Reed, Susan Storm, Ben and Johnny Storm use the world's largest diamond to harness Collosus's power from outer space.



Reed and Susan discuss astronomy and heavenly bodies.

After surviving the crash, the quartet contemplate the strange, new abilities they have acquired.

The King of Lattvaria, Doctor Doom, reveals himself as their captor.

Johnny uses his newfound flaming powers to escape the clutches of Doom.

The team is held hostage, but by whom?

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YOU'VE GOT TO HAVE CHARACTER

One aspect generally missing from most superhero movies is character development. For example, the Dark Knight himself was conspicuously absent during most of the *Batman* films. Director Tim Burton seemed more interested in his villains, the Joker and the Penguin, giving them more screen time.

Oley Sassone was determined to make his heroes the stars: "I always try to find the characters because no matter how many special effects and explosions you have, if people can't relate to it, [the film's] not going to be good. You've got to touch people on an emotional level. Whether it's *The Fantastic Four* or *On the Waterfront*, you've got to have that humanistic quality. Then when something happens with the special effects, it directly affects the character, which directly affects the way the audience feels about them.

"I've worked as an actor and know how to talk about character development," the director continues. "I try to take that mechanical edge off filmmaking, so you can blend the technology with the artistry. There are so many bad movies made today. For the most part, it's all marketing."

ONE EXPLOSIVE SHOT

The making of *The Fantastic Four* turned out to be a grueling, 25-day shoot, with most days running over 18 hours. Word is that this $2-million movie looks like a $10-million production. Sassone credits this fact with the dedication of the crew, made up of mostly fans, who "gave 150%!" he says.

"Basically it came down to one big problem and that was the schedule," he says. "The way they make movies over at [Concorde] is that they have a certain amount of days that they're going to make their movies in—and that's it. They don't care if it has 100 special effects or two special effects—they expect you to do it. It's sort of insane, but I had to do what I had to do."

The inflexibility of the schedule led to a lot of creative solutions to complex problems. "There's no question that necessity is the mother of invention," Sassone says. "We had to shoot our own miniatures, instead of having it done motion-control. We literally shot the spaceship in front of a little pinhole screen on Corman's stage and the stuff really looked good. We had one shot at it, and thank God it turned out really well, 'cause once we blew it up it was gone!"

Doom is slightly peeved.

Using fabric made from unstable molecules, Susan sews suits for the Fantastic Four.

Ben, as the Thing, searches the sewers for Alicia.

CLOBBERIN' TIME!

Doom threatens to destroy the FF's Baxter Building—and New York with it.

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MARVELOUS MYTHOS

There's writing on the wall of the bathroom at Corman's studio that reads, "How I made 40 movies at Concorde and never made a dime" (an obvious reference to Roger Corman's book *How I Made a Hundred Movies in Hollywood and Never Lost a Dime*). No one would argue the fact that the crew worked hard for the little money they received, but what makes ***The Fantastic Four*** different from the many disastrous films originating from the Marvel Universe? Oley Sassone offers this insight: "I think [Marvel] has had problems with producers and their overall deals haven't been good historically. I think they need to go to the big boys—to the studios."

Sassone hopes to be in the studio loop as well, directing bigger pictures. His next project will be a thriller called ***Black Creek***, which he will do with Hemdale Films.

But Sassone is confident about his contribution to the FF mythos. "Having the opportunity to bring these mythological characters to life is great," he says. "Stan Lee and Marvel have already made them a legend and it was like being handed gold. It was really a wonderful opportunity for me just to be able to do chapter one and, hopefully, make it successful enough that they'll do chapter two and three. You know we're all bustin' our ass to make this thing work. I know there's a built-in audience, people who've followed the Fantastic Four for years. But, there's a new, young audience, and those are the people that I want to really be true to. I'm hoping when those people see it, they say, 'He delivered.'"

THE OTHER FOUR

As FILM THREAT went to press, we learned that Steven Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment was interested in producing a big-budget *FF* film with Chris Columbus set to direct. As talks for that project continued, there was speculation that Corman's $2-million production would be shelved forever in favor of this new version. Fortunately, Spielberg's company backed out and we can now look forward to seeing this independent production made by the fans and not the greedy marketers and deal makers. *The Fantastic Four* was once the world's greatest comic book. Maybe it still is.

The Fantastic Four *is tentatively scheduled to open Labor Day at a theater near you.*

Alicia meets Ben a second time but he has...*changed!*

The Jeweller, who stole the FF's diamond and caused the accident that created them, holds Alicia hostage.

Doctor Doom invades the Jeweller's lair and kidnaps Alicia.

Mr. Fantastic confronts Doom and discovers he is actually his old friend Victor.

The FF travel to Lattvaria, where Doom plans to drain the energy of Colossus from their bodies, stripping them of their powers.

Doctor Doom is defeated. Or is he?

Until the next adventure...

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